

Developing Consensus for Refuge's Future

By Congressman Ron Kind

Many people are surprised to hear that the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge receives more annual visitors than Yellowstone National Park. That's right, the Upper Mississippi River, with 3.7 million annual visitors, is a more popular destination than "Old Faithful." Due to its popularity and multiple uses, it is really no surprise that the Upper Mississippi River is a favorite for outdoor and nature enthusiasts.

As someone who has grown up in the Refuge and enjoyed the many wonders of the Mississippi River, I proudly call myself "River rat." I understand how important a healthy river system is, not only to our region's economy but also to our quality of life. As a boy, I would spend countless hours a day out on the River or exploring the Refuge. In the years since, I've had the great pleasure of raising two River rats of my own, taking them out as often as possible to enjoy everything from boating and swimming to hunting and fishing.

In an effort to ensure future generations are given the opportunity to enjoy all the benefits that the River and Refuge currently provide its many users and visitors, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is in the process of developing a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP). According to FWS staff, the CCP is meant to establish new planning requirements for each of the nation's 545 refuges and clarify the standards and process used to regulate various recreational and commercial uses. Since the CCP's May 1, 2005 release, FWS has conducted 30 public meetings and met with countless individuals and organizations on the draft Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge CCP.

Developing consensus has proven to be no easy task. Rightfully, individuals have different interests and ideas for the Refuge's future. Finding the right balance between these often competing and conflicting interests is imperative to ensuring the Refuge's continuing ecological, environmental, and economic health. While opinions may differ on what course to take in developing the CCP and managing the Refuge's future, none of us should ever lose sight of the River's and the Refuge's importance to our area's culture, economy, and quality of life.

Understanding this, I have worked continually since I was elected to Congress to develop and implement public policies to restore and strengthen the river habitat, combat invasive species, promote land conservation, reduce sedimentation, and improve water quality. I have also made it a priority both in Washington and here in Wisconsin to strengthen and forge relations among people and organizations with an interest in the health of the Upper Mississippi River Basin and have reached out to those who possess a great knowledge about the River to bring them to the table.

These measures as well as the development of the CCP have one fundamental goal- ensuring the River's and the Refuge's continuing ecological, environmental, and economic health. The public comment period and the open meetings conducted by the FWS have provided an opportunity for people to share their ideas and opinions about how to best achieve this goal. This process has been invaluable not just for generating ideas and measuring public opinion, but also in reminding ourselves just how central a role the River and the Refuge play in all of our lives. There are still [two

weeks] remaining in the CCP public comment period to let your voice and your passion for the River be heard before the deadline passes.

Comments on preferred alternative E are being received by FWS staff until March 6, 2006. To find out more about the process and submit comments directly to FWS, please visit www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/uppermiss or call 888-291-5719.

This is just one example of the many ways the River and the Refuge contribute to the high quality of life we enjoy living with one the greatest natural treasures located right here in our back yard. First established in 1924, the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge provides opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation, boating and canoeing